ANCIENT HAZARA

Hazara Gujjran: From Aornos and Waihind to Takshashila and the Kashmir Himalayas

A Historical Reconstruction of the Aornos–Urasa Hazara Satrapy

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Ancient Hazara Gujjran formed one of the most strategic frontier regions of early South Asian history, extending across Hosala (Gosala), Aornos, Waihind, Purushapura (Peshawar), the Hydaspes (Jehlam) River basin, Takshashila (Taxila), and the Kashmir Himalayas. Positioned between the Indus corridor and the Himalayan gateways, this mountainous satrapy (province) served as a vital military, political, and cultural bridge connecting Central Asia, Gandhara, Kashmir, and the Punjab plains.

Based on historical chronicles, geographical re-evaluations, archaeological observations, and regional documentation, the ancient fortress system of Aornos emerges not merely as an isolated stronghold, but as the defensive heart of the Hazara frontier. The famous siege conducted by Alexander the Great in 326 BC represented the final and most critical military operation undertaken to secure his rear supply lines through the Hindu Kush before advancing deeper into the Punjab.

✦ The Geographical Reality of Aornos

Earlier colonial-era historians often searched broadly across various mountain systems to identify the precise location of Aornos. However, the groundbreaking archaeological investigations of Sir Aurel Stein, later refined by regional scholarship and local geographical analysis, identified the fortress with Pir Sar (Saint's Peak) and the adjoining Una Sar ridge. Linguistically, researchers argue that the regional "nr" sound was simplified into "r" by Greek scribes, contributing to the classical rendering of Aornos.

This formidable natural fortress stood within the great bend of the Indus River, immediately west of the ancient Hazara Satrapy. Surrounded by steep ravines, forested heights, and narrow mountain passages, Aornos represented one of the strongest defensive positions in the ancient world.

✦ Embolina, Amb, and Alexander's Military Base

To assault a mountain fortress of such immense scale, Alexander required a secure logistics and staging center nearby. Classical references to Embolina correspond geographically with the Gujjars Amb region and surrounding territories along the Indus banks in present-day Haripur Hazara Gujjran.

From this fortified base, Alexander established his military perimeter and organized a complex siege strategy. His forces constructed an extensive timber bridge across the deep Burimar ravine, enabling the movement of heavy catapults and siege machinery toward the elevated defensive positions.

Arrian described Aornos as possessing a broad and fertile summit supplied by independent natural springs, allowing the defenders to withstand prolonged sieges. This natural self-sufficiency transformed the fortress into a near-impregnable sanctuary overlooking the Indus frontier.

✦ The Siege of Aornos

The central defensive strength of Aornos relied upon the Burimar Depression, a steep and deep saddle lying between Alexander's forward position at Una Sar and the principal sanctuary atop Pir Sar.

The Timber Mound: Unable to launch a direct mountain assault, Alexander ordered his soldiers to cut thousands of pine logs and gradually fill the ravine with earthworks and timber over a grueling three-day period. This massive artificial mound allowed Greek archers and catapults to approach the defensive walls within effective range.

The Interception: Once the Macedonian siege engines gained an elevation advantage, the defending coalition attempted a strategic nighttime withdrawal through the mountain passes. According to classical accounts, Alexander's elite vanguard intercepted them by scaling the rocky cliffs with ropes and climbing detachments.

The struggle for Aornos established the northern Indus rim as one of the most fiercely contested military corridors of ancient South Asia. Control of this gateway meant total command over communications between Gandhara, Kashmir, the Punjab, and the trans-Himalayan regions.

✦ The Governance of the Aornos–Urasa Hazara Satrapy

Following the conquest, the wider Hazara frontier was reorganized under satrapal administration. After moving toward Northern Hindustan, a land repopulated by Hazrat Hind, **Sisikottos Khattana Gujjar** was appointed Satrap (Governor) of the Aornos Hazara Gujjran. Meanwhile, **Arsakes Gujjar** was retained as the local ruler of the Urasa or Arsa territory.

The political geography of the region connected Waihind, Purushapura, Takshashila, Kashmir, and the upper Indus basin into a unified frontier zone that guarded the approaches into northwestern India.

Over centuries, the region's identity evolved linguistically through multiple historical traditions: **Ho-SA-LA / Gosala** — the name used by the Chinese pilgrim and chronicler Xuanzang; **Urasa** — the terminology preserved in Kalhana's Rajatarangini; and **Khazar & Gurjar Lineages** — connections drawn by regional historians linking these classical names with broader Central Asian ethnolinguistic traditions.

✦ From Ancient Hazara to Haripur

The historical continuity of Hazara survived through successive dynasties, frontier kingdoms, and administrative transitions. In 1822, General Hari Singh Nalwa established a planned regional headquarters that became modern Haripur. Following the British annexation in 1849, the administrative center was later shifted toward Abbottabad under Major James Abbott.

Despite these transitions, Hazara retained its vital importance as a cultural and agricultural heartland linking the plains of Punjab with the Himalayan highlands.

✦ Mela Zamindaran and the Cultural Legacy of Hazara

The enduring cultural institutions of the region are perfectly mirrored in the historic Mela Zamindaran, which has evolved across nearly four centuries:

1640 CE — The Inception: The festival was traditionally initiated under **Nawab Esa Moqaddam**, Governor of the Hazara Satrapy, and chief of Hazara Gujjran under Nawab Musa. The mela originally celebrated the agricultural and pastoral traditions of the region, serving as an annual gathering for tribal, rural, and commercial communities.

1901 CE — The Horse & Cattle Show: During the colonial period, the British administration formally institutionalized the event, renaming it the "Horse and Cattle Show."

1940 CE — Construction of Curtis Ground: Deputy Commissioner **George Campbell Strahan Curtis** established a dedicated sports and exhibition arena in Haripur, which became universally known as the Curtis Ground.

2014 CE — Rebranding to Jashn-e-Hazara: The District Council of Haripur officially revived the historical identity of the festival by renaming it "Mela Jashn-e-Hazara," acting on the professional recommendation of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Minister **Yousaf Ayub Khan**.

2019 CE — The 111th Milestone: The 111th **Raja Nasir Kiyani** Mela Jashn-e-Hazara was celebrated in profound memory of the late Chairman of the District Council of Haripur.

2026 CE — The Modern Celebration: From May 22–24, 2026, the 112th Mela Jashn-e-Hazara was celebrated at the Pak-China Factory Ground, serving as a highly successful continuation of this centuries-old regional tradition.

✦ Conclusion

The history of Ancient Hazara Gujjran reflects the enduring significance of the Indus-Himalayan frontier in the political and military history of South Asia. From the siege of Aornos and the campaigns of Alexander to the cultural traditions preserved in modern Hazara, the region has consistently remained a vital crossroads of civilizations, armies, trade routes, and mountain kingdoms. The interconnected landscapes of Aornos, Waihind, Purushapura, Takshashila, Kashmir, and the Hydaspes basin together formed a frontier civilization whose historical memory continues to thrive through geography, folklore, regional identity, and deep cultural continuity.